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SUBJECT: TASHKENT SHOOT-OUT ATTRIBUTED TO UZBEK EXTREMIST GROUP

REF: TASHKENT 1469

¶1. (SBU) Summary: An official press release from the Uzbek Attorney General's Office published September 4 reported that the shoot-out which took place on Saturday (reftel) was part of a special operation directed at a group of Islamic terrorists. The armed men were believed to be members of an extremist group responsible for a series of assassinations and attempted assassinations.

EXTREMIST ACTIVITIES IN TASHKENT

¶2. (SBU) The first assassination attributed to this unidentified extremist group was the fatal stabbing of the young deputy director of a local madrassah on July 16 of this year. The victim was found with more than two thousand US dollars in cash, car keys and credit cards in his pocket, clearly ruling out robbery as a motive. On July 31, the principal Imam of Tashkent survived multiple stab wounds after being called out of his house by three assailants. The Imam is a highly visible religious figure in Uzbekistan, and known to be a sharp critic of followers of both Wahhabi Islam and the Islamic group Hizb ut-Tahrir. On August 9, Hasan Asadov, a highly placed official in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, was shot to death in his home. Asadov was a member of a GOU interagency group dedicated to fighting terrorism.

¶3. (SBU) The press release also states that the extremists who participated in the shoot-out had been trained in "foreign terrorist centers," an allegation which was repeated by a highly placed police contact. Three extremists were reportedly killed during the shoot-out. An unknown number of suspected members of the same group were arrested throughout Tashkent following the shoot-out, according to a police contact. This contact also claimed that surveillance records show that a Chechen terrorist made telephone contact with the extremists shortly before the shoot-out, and then subsequently committed suicide (a development which has not been separately confirmed).

¶4. (SBU) Comment: If this event was, as seems increasingly probable, associated with extremists, it is a reminder that Uzbekistan remains a prime target for these groups in the region. The GOU routinely expresses this concern as increased pressure in

Afghanistan and Pakistan leads some hardened terrorists to move towards Central Asia, and as their profile on Afghan transit (Northern Distribution Network) goes up. Although Uzbekistan and Tashkent are by no means permissive environments due to the heavy presence of the security forces, the GOU's control even of the capital is clearly not air tight. Curiously, conspiracy theories still circulate that the shoot-out was merely a "spectacle" staged by the GOU to show that there is a threat and that the authorities have it under control.

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